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ABSTRACT

Adult literacy programs must provide individuals with the essential knowledge and skills which enable them to function effectively within their environments. The goal of adult literacy programs must be to enable students to become less dependent on others, which is also the goal of most adult students. Administrators of adult literacy programs have the responsibility to research and assess the needs of the community, which may involve examining the personality of the community and surveying its needs as determined by community service agencies, governmental organizations, educational institutions, business organizations, and citizens. Determining the needs of the community can provide insight into areas of program development that should receive special emphasis. An examination of language competence of adults in the target population may indicate that a large number of adults are literate in non-English, yet not literate in English; or not literate in either non-English or English; or not literate in native English. Adults' performance limitations and goals must also be considered in planning the program. Suggestions are given for both formal and informal measures of skills and abilities in order to individualize instruction. (MKM)

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The Role of Adult Literacy in the Community

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The Role of Adult Literacy in the Community*

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Introduction

The role of adult literacy in the community has changed throughout the history of the United States in order to meet evolving needs in a growing society.

Some form of adult literacy instruction can be traced from the "freedom school" movement after the Civil War, through the period of immigration at the turn of the Twentieth Century, through periods of crises such as the Depression and two World Wars, to the 1960's with its vast sociological upheavals.(1) The 1960's and 1970's mark a period of history in the United States which is indicative of growth: growth in moving out of an industrial society which had little need for literacy skills in its work force to a space-aged technological society which demanded literacy in a highly-specialized work force; growth in moving from centuries of life spans that were terminated prematurely to a period of healthy, esoteric "golden age"; Growth in being catapulted from an era of social insensitivity to an era of social consciousness.(2) As has often happened throughout history whenever societies have undergone periods of extreme, rapid growth, societal institutions have been hard pressed to accommodate and, subsequently, to assimilate these changes into their traditional framework.

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* Paper presented at the Twenty-first Annual Convention of the International Reading Association. Anaheim, California, May 12, 1976

Goal

Adult literacy programs have a vital role to perform in our changing society. Somehow, these programs must provide individuals with the essential knowledge and skills which enable them to function effectively within their environments. Opportunities must exist which allow these individuals to use these skills toward their own and their community's development.(3) Whether knowledge and skills include learning to speak the English language, learning to read, write, and compute well enough to obtain and retain employment, learning about governmental structure in order to obtain citizenship or learning to function within our legal-socio-economic system, the goal of adult literacy programs must be to enable these individuals to become less dependent upon others, which, appropriately enough, is also the goal of most adult students.

Researching the Needs of the Community

In a country as large as the United States, the effects of geographic, economic, social, and educational variations on community life must be seriously explored in planning and implementing adult basic education programs. The responsibility for researching and assessing the needs of the community necessarily rests with the program director and his staff.

Researching community needs can be divided into two categories: exploration of the "personality" of the community and exploration of the actual needs within the community.

The "personality" of the community. Within the limits of statistical data, governmental agencies can provide valuable information

concerning figures on total population, subgroups within the total population, number of high school dropouts, number of persons receiving welfare, number of persons using library services, number of secondary school students enrolling in college, types of employment offered within the community, average yearly income of residents in the area, rate of unemployment, and crime rate within the area. Using the information gathered, the program director has justification for inferring certain general community needs. The correctness and depth of these inferences, however, are limited in that they are dependent upon the sensitivity, experience, and actual knowledge possessed by the director and his staff. Therefore, a complete needs assessment requires exploration into the second category.

Actual needs within the community. At this point, a survey of needs as determined by community service agencies, governmental organizations, educational institutions, business organizations, and citizens is not only desirable, but essential. Too often, this assessment is eliminated from program planning because directors underestimate the importance and long-range effectiveness of such an effort and overestimate the amount of time and energy involved in conducting such a survey. Successful completion of this assessment, however, provides the director and his staff with the individual and institutional contacts needed to establish an adult literacy programs as part of a total community effort.

Program Development

Determining actual needs within the community can provide insight into areas of program development that should receive special

emphasis.

I. Language Competence

For example, an assessment of the language competencies of adults in the target population may indicate that large numbers of adults are:

a. Literate in Non-English; Not Literate In English

Adults who can read in their native language are able to draw upon that knowledge to decode another language. They may not comprehend what they have read, but they are able to apply basic decoding skills after some instruction. A person learning to read in Spanish, for example, given linguistic cues for decodification, can decipher:

" Que hora es?" "Son las tres y diez de la tarde." Orally, his pronunciation may be excellent. Unless he realizes the meanings of "hora", "tres", "diez" and "tarde", he does not comprehend the passage. Translation: "What time is it?" "It is 3:10 in the afternoon." Already possessing a frame of reference, these adults may learn to read rather rapidly providing there are no debilitating performance limitations.

b. Not Literate In Non-English And English

Instruction for adults who cannot read in their native language and who cannot speak English is another matter. These adults do not have a decoding

system upon which to base transference to English. The importance of building language competency in English has been emphasized by proponents of the audio-lingual method of teaching English as a Second Language as well as by linguists. Finocchiaro suggests, "It is recommended that emphasis in the program be on understanding and speaking. However, as much reading and writing should be done as students are capable of doing. In English, reading of important signs, numbers, abbreviations, and simple employment, housing, or welfare forms should be emphasized. Writing should begin with material needed for self-identification (name, address, social security number, names of family members, etc.)."(4)

Whether or not these adults should be taught to actually read in their native language prior to being taught to read in English is a question that should be researched thoroughly. Perhaps the period of instruction needed to progress from illiteracy to literacy in English could be shortened by teaching adults to read first in their native language. However, the needs and goals of these adults are of priority and many of them may see the reading of English as an immediate need and may envision the time spent learning to read in their native language as unnecessary.

c. Not Literate In Native English

In the United States, there are large numbers of adults who, although born and raised in this country with English as their native language, are not literate in English. Despite having been exposed daily to written symbols representing the English language, they have been unable to decode those symbols. For many of these adults. specific performance limitations can be suspected. For others, isolated geographic locations with accompanying educational and socio-economic deprivations, have contributed to the problem.

Knowledge of the language competencies of adults in the target population can provide a basis for planning instruction that will be both meaningful and efficient.

II. Performance Limitations

The necessity to assess an adult's physical condition prior to providing instruction has been well established. Yet, in actual practice, this assessment often does not occur, or occurs only when a teacher or paraprofessional "discovers" the limitation weeks or months after the adult has been receiving instruction. Vision, hearing, and general health can be assessed immediately. In addition to these, adults may need referrals to alcohol or drug treatment centers.

In working with adults, other needs relating to survival and the quality of life must be assessed. For

many adults, vocational plans are extremely important because the basic literacy program may have to be keyed to a vocational program. For other adults, learning to drive a car is of prime importance. Still others have a "social" need to belong to a group or to relate to another individual. In many cases, this "social" need may be an adult's sole motivation for class attendance.

Adults enroll for literacy instruction because they have goals. These goals are extremely important when one considers that these adults are in the midst of what should be the most productive period of their lives. Yet they reach this period with the realization that they have attained adulthood without mastering the literacy skills necessary to function as well as they would like in a highly-literate, highly-technological society.

Individual goals supercede goals that might have been set up arbitrarily by curriculum specialists and administrators. For this reason, a highly-structured, inflexible curriculum is not justifiable for adult literacy programs. Neither, however, is an unorganized, haphazard program justifiable in an adult program because adult goals are not met efficiently. In most cases, adults are not captive audiences and are apt to leave a program if it does not meet their needs rather quickly.

III. Present Level of Skills and Abilities

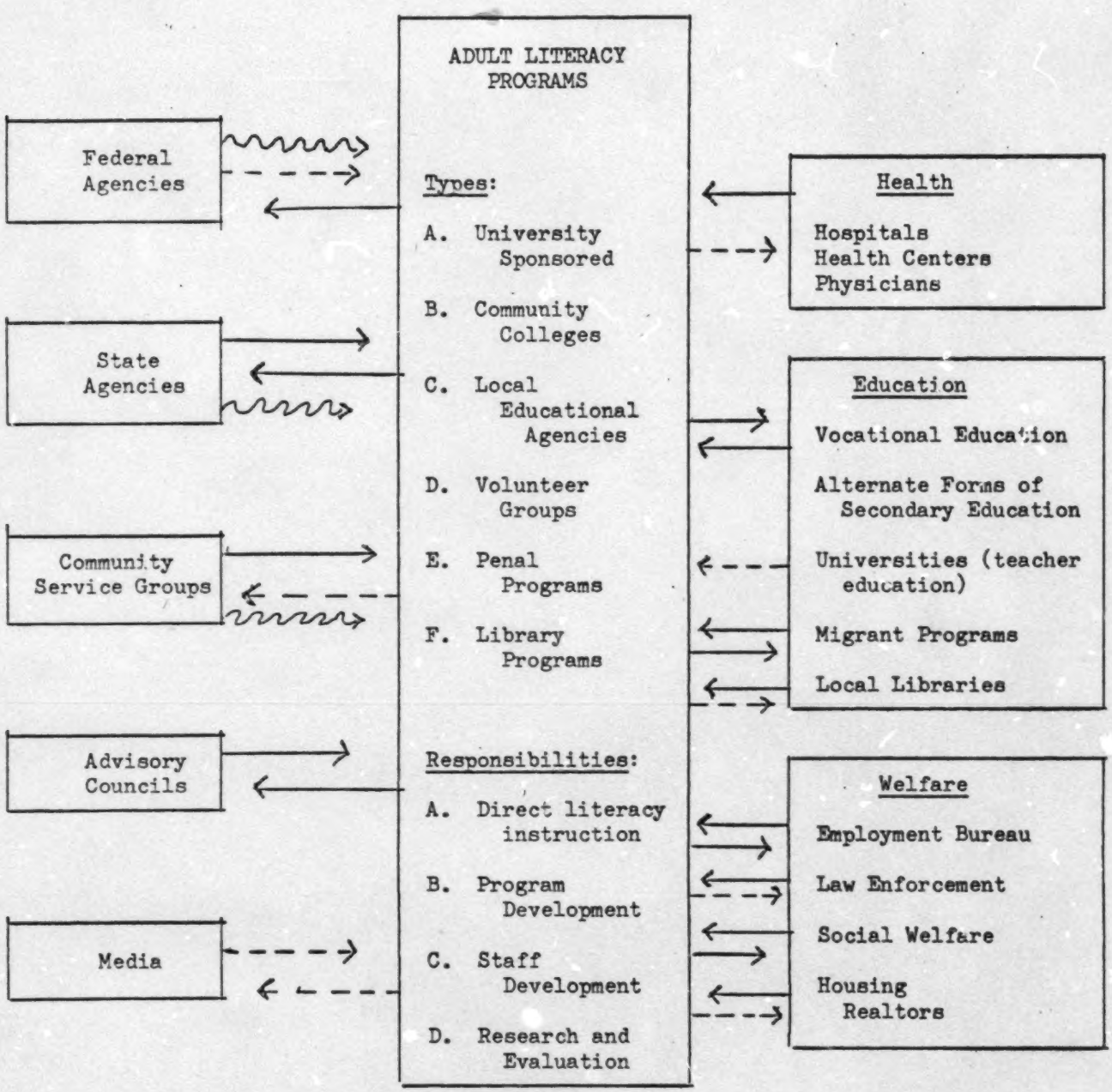
Both formal and informal measures of skills and abilities have a place in adult literacy programs. Directors and teachers have the responsibility of determining which assessments are non-threatening, yet still provide pertinent information for the purposes of individualizing instruction. Tests of Functional Adult Literacy provides a current, concise review and evaluation of the following types of tests: criterion-referenced, such as the Adult Performance Level Functional Literacy Test (APL); standardized, such as the Basic Occupational Literacy Test (BOLT); and informal, such as the Adult Basic Reading Inventory.(5) Tests developed for specific populations, such as English as a Second Language students, may also be of interest to some directors.(6)

Inherent in general program development, of course, is a well-planned procedure for staff development.

Effecting Societal Change

If the goal of adult literacy is truly to provide individuals with the opportunities, skills and knowledges which will enable them to become independent, contributing members of their communities, then, for evaluation purposes, some societal change should be evident. Adult literacy directors, therefore, must analyze community organizations as to levels of involvement in terms of direct, reciprocal communication, service communication or funding support to facilitate the eventual evaluation of the quantity and quality of societal change resulting from instructional programs. The following diagram illustrates the integrative role of adult literacy in the community in terms of communication and support.

The Role of Adult Literacy in the Community



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Tests:

(a) English as a Second Language Assessment (ESLA)

(b) Informal Reading Inventory in Spanish (IRIS)

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